THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

A TALE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY IN THE TIME OF SILAS WRIGHT

By

IRVING BACHELLER

AUTHOR OF
EBEN HOLDEN, D'RI AND I, DARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES,
KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XI—Continued.

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I count this one of the great events of my youth. But there was a greater one, although it seemed not so at the time of it. A traveler on the road to Ballybeen had dropped his pocketbook containing a large amount of money—$2,700 was the sum, if I remember rightly. He was a man who, being justly suspicious of the banks, had withdrawn his money. Posters announced the loss and the offer of a large reward. The village was profoundly stirred by them. Searching parties went up the road stirring its dust and groping in its grass and briers for the great prize which was supposed to be lying there. It was said, however, that the quest had been unsuccessful. So the lost pocketbook became a treasured mystery of the village and of all the hills and valleys toward Ballybeen—a topic of old wives and gabbling husbands at the fireside for unnumbered years.

By and by the fall term of school ended. Uncle Peabody came down to get me the day before Christmas. I had enjoyed my work and my life at the Hackets', on the whole, but I was glad to be going home again. My uncle was in high spirits and there were many packages in the sleigh.

"A merry Christmas to ye both an' may the Lord love ye!" said Mr. Hacket as he bade us goodby. "Every day our thoughts will be going up the hill to your house."

The bells rang merrily as we hurried through the swamp in the hard snow paths.

"We're goin' to move," said my uncle presently. "We've agreed to get out by the middle o' May."

"How does that happen?" I asked.

"I settled with Grimshaw and agreed to go. If it hadn't 'a' been for Wright and Baldwin we wouldn't 'a' got a cent. They threatened to bid against him at the sale. So he settled. We're goin' to have a new home. We've bought a hundred an' fifty acres from Abe Binford. Goin' to build a new house in the spring. It will be nearer the village."

He playfully nudged my ribs with his elbow.

"We've had a little good luck, Bart," he went on. "I'll tell ye what it is if you won't say anything about it."

I promised.

"I dunno as it would matter much," he continued, "but I don't want to do any braggin'. It ain't anybody's business, anyway. An old uncle over in Vermont died three weeks ago and left us thirty-eight hundred dollars. It was old Uncle Ezra Baynes o' Hinesburg. Died without a chick or child. Your aunt and me slipped down to Potsdam an' took the stage an' went over an' got the money. It was more money than I ever see before in my life. We put it in the bank in Potsdam to keep it out o' Grimshaw's hands. I wouldn't trust that man as far as you could throw a bull by the tail."

It was a cold, clear night, and when we reached home the new stove was snapping with the heat in its firebox and the pudding puffing in the pot and old Shep dreaming in the chimney corner. Aunt Deel gave me a hug at the door. Shep barked and leaped to my shoulders.

"Why, Bart! You're growin' like a weed—ain't ye?—ayes ye be," my aunt said as she stood and looked at me. "Set right down here an' warm ye—ayes!—I've done all the chores—ayes!"

How warm and comfortable was the dear old room with those beloved faces in it. I wonder if paradise itself can seem more pleasant to me. I have had the best food this world can provide, in my time, but never anything that I ate with a keener relish than the pudding and milk and bread and butter and cheese and pumpkin pie which Aunt Deel gave us that night.

Supper over, I wiped the dishes for my aunt while Uncle Peabody went out to feed and water the horses. Then we sat down in the genial warmth while I told the story of my life in "the busy town," as they called it. What pride and attention they gave me then!

My fine clothes and the story of how I had come by them taxed my ingenuity somewhat, although not improperly. I had to be careful not to let them know that I had been ashamed of the homemade suit. They somehow felt the truth about it and a little silence followed the story. Then Aunt Deel drew her chair near me and touched my hair very gently and looked into my face without speaking.

"Ayes! I know," she said presently, in a kind of caressing tone, with a touch of sadness in it. "They ain't used to coarse homespun stuff down there in the village. They made fun o' ye—didn't they, Bart?"

"I don't care about that," I assured them. "The mind's the measure of the man," I quoted, remembering the lines the Scanter had repeated to me.

"That's sound!" Uncle Peabody exclaimed with enthusiasm.

Aunt Deel took my hand in hers and surveyed it thoughtfully for a moment without speaking.

"You ain't goin' to have to suffer that way no more," she said in a low tone. We're goin' to be more comf'table—ayes. Yer uncle thought we better go West, but I couldn't bear to go off so fur an' leave mother an' father an' sister Susan an' all the folks we loved layin' here in the ground alone—I want to lay down with 'em by an' by an' wait for the sound o' the trumpet—ayes!—mebbe it'll be for thousands o' years—ayes!"

To our astonishment the clock struck twelve.

"Hurrah! It's merry Christmas!" said Uncle Peabody as he jumped to his feet and began to sing of the little Lord Jesus.

We joined him while he stood beating time with his right hand after the fashion of a singing master.

"Off with yer boots, friend!" he exclaimed when the stanza was finished. "We don't have to set up and watch like the shepherds."

We drew our boots on the chair round with hands clasped over the knee—how familiar is the process, and yet I haven't seen it in more than half a century! I lighted a candle and scampered upstairs in my stocking feet, Uncle Peabody following close and slapping my thigh as if my pace were not fast enough for him. In the midst of our skylarking the candle tumbled to the floor and I had to go back to the stove and relight it.

How good it seemed to be back in the old room under the shingles! The heat of the stovepipe had warmed its hospitality.

"It's been kind o' lonesome here," said Uncle Peabody as he opened the window. "I always let the wind come in to keep me company—it gits so warm."

"Ye can't look at yer stockin' yit," said Aunt Deel when I came downstairs about eight o'clock, having slept through chore time. I remember it was the delicious aroma of frying ham and buckwheat cakes which awoke me; and who wouldn't rise and shake off the cloak of slumber on a bright, cold winter morning with such provocation?

"This ain't no common Chris'mas—I tell ye," Aunt Deel went on. "Santa Claus won't git here short o' noon I wouldn't wonder—ayes!"

About eleven o'clock Uncle Hiram and Aunt Eliza and their five children arrived with loud and merry greetings. Then came other aunts and uncles and cousins. With what noisy good cheer the men entered the house after they had put up their horses! I remember how they laid their hard, heavy hands on my head and shook it a little as they spoke of my "stretchin' up" or gave me a playful slap on the shoulder—an ancient token of good will—the first form of the accolade, I fancy. What joyful good humor there was in those simple men and women—enough to temper the woes of a city if it could have been applied to their relief. They stood thick around the stove warming themselves and taking off its griddles and opening its doors and surveying it inside and out with much curiosity.

"Now for the Christmas tree," said Uncle Peabody as he led the way into our best room, where a fire was burning in the old Franklin grate. "Come on, boys an' girls."

What a wonderful sight was the Christmas tree—the first we had had in our house—a fine spreading balsam loaded with presents! Uncle Hiram jumped into the air and clapped his feet together and shouted: "Hold me, somebody, or I'll grab the hull tree an' run away with it."

Uncle Jabez held one foot in both hands before him and joyfully hopped around the tree.

These relatives had brought their family gifts, some days before, to be hung on its branches. The thing that caught my eye was a big silver watch hanging by a long golden chain to one of the boughs. Uncle Peabody took it down and held it aloft by the chain, so that none should miss the sight, saying:

"From Santa Claus for Bart!"

A murmur of admiration ran through the company which gathered around me as I held the treasure in my trembling hands.

"This is for Bart, too," Uncle Peabody shouted as he took down a bolt of soft blue cloth and laid it in my arms. "Now there's somethin' that's jest about as slick as a kitten's ear. Feel of it. It'c for a suit o' clothes. Come all the way from Burlington. Now get-up there. You've got your load."

I moved out of the way in a hurricane of merriment. It was his one great day of pride and vanity. He did not try to conceal them.

The other presents floated for a moment in this irresistible tide of laughing good will and found their owners. I have never forgotten how Uncle Jabez chased Aunt Minerva around the house with a wooden snake cunningly carved and colored. I observed there were many things on the tree which had not been taken down when we younger ones gathered up our wealth and repaired to Aunt Deel's room to feast our eyes upon it and compare our good fortune.

The women and the big girls rolled up their sleeves and went to work with Aunt Deel preparing the dinner. The great turkey and the chicken pie were made ready and put in the oven and the potatoes and the onions and the winter squash were soon boiling in their pots on the stovetop. Meanwhile the children were playing in my aunt's bedroom and Uncle Hiram and Uncle Jabez were pulling sticks in a corner while the other men sat tipped against the wall watching and making playful comments—all save my Uncle Peabody, who was trying to touch his head to the floor and then straighten up with the aid of the broomstick.

In the midst of it Aunt Deel opened the front door and old Kate, the Silent Woman, entered. To my surprise, she wore a decent-looking dress of gray homespun cloth and a white cloud looped over her head and ears and tied around her neck and a good pair of boots.

"Merry Chris'mas!" we all shouted.

She smiled and nodded her head and sat down in the chair which Uncle Peabody had placed for her at the stove side. Aunt Deel took the cloud off her head while Kate drew her mittens—newly knitted of the best yarn. Then my aunt brought some stockings and a shawl from the tree and laid them on the lap of old Kate. What a silence fell upon us as we saw tears coursing down the cheeks of this lonely old woman of the countryside—tears of joy, doubtless, for God knows how long it had been since the poor, abandoned soul had seen a merry Christmas and shared its kindness. I did not fail to observe how clean her face and hands looked! She was greatly changed.

She took my hand as I went to her side and tenderly caressed it. A gentler smile came to her face than ever I had seen upon it. The old stern look returned for a moment as she held one finger aloft in a gesture which only I and my Aunt Deel understood. We knew it signalized a peril and a mystery. That I should have to meet it, somewhere up the hidden pathway, I had no doubt whatever.

"Dinner's ready!" exclaimed the cheerful voice of Aunt Deel.

Then what a stirring of chairs and feet as we sat down at the table. Old

"From Santa Claus for Bart!"

Kate sat by the side of my aunt and we were all surprised at her good manners.

We jested and laughed and drank cider and reviewed the year's history and ate as only they may eat who have big bones and muscles and the vitality of oxen. I never taste the flavor of sage and currant jelly or hear a hearty laugh without thinking of those holiday dinners in the old log house on Rattleroad.

That Christmas brought me nothing better than those words, the memory of which is one of the tallest towers in that long avenue of my past down which I have been looking these many days. About all you can do for a boy, worth while, is to give him something good to remember.

The day had turned dark. The temperature had risen and the air was dank and chilly. The men began to hitch up their horses.

So, one by one, the sleighloads left us with cheery good-bys and a grinding of runners and a jingling of bells. When the last had gone Uncle Peabody and I went into the house. Aunt Deel sat by the stove, old Kate by the window looking out at the failing dusk. How still the house seemed!

"There's one thing I forgot," I said as I proudly took out of my wallet the six one-dollar bills which I had earned by working Saturdays and handed three of them to my aunt and three to my uncle, saying:

"That is my Christmas present to you. I earned it myself."

I remember so well their astonishment and the trembling of their hands and the look of their faces.

"It's grand—ayes!" Aunt Deel said in a low tone.

She rose in a moment and beckoned to me and my uncle. We followed her through the open door to the other room.

"I'll tell ye what I'd do," she whispered. "I'd give 'em to ol' Kate—ayes! She's goin' to stay with us tomorrow."

"Good idee!" said Uncle Peabody.

So I took the money out of their hands and went in and gave it to the Silent Woman.

"That's your present from me," I said.

How can I forget how she held my arm against her with that loving, familiar, rocking motion of a woman who is soothing a baby at her breast and kissed my coat sleeve? She released my arm and, turning to the window, leaned her head upon its sill and shook with sobs. The dusk had thickened. As I returned to my seat by the stove I could dimly see her form against the light of the window. We sat in silence for a little while.

Then Uncle Peabody rose and got a candle and lighted it at the hearth.

I held the lantern while Uncle Peabody fed the sheep and the two cows and milked—a slight chore these winter days.

"You and I are to go off to bed purty early," he said as we were going back to the house. "Yer Aunt Deel wants to see Kate alone and git her to talk if she can.

"I dunno but she'll swing back into this world ag'in," said Uncle Peabody when we had gone up to our little room. "I guess all she needs is to be treated like a human bein'. Yer Aunt Deel an' I couldn't git over thinkin' o' what she done for you that night in the ol' barn. So I took some o' yer aunt's good clothes to her an' a pair o' boots an' asked her to come to Chris'mas. She lives in a little room over the blacksmith shop down to Butterfield's mill. I told her I'd come after her with the cutter but she shook her head. I knew she'd rather walk."

He was yawning as he spoke and soon we were both asleep under the shingles.

CHAPTER XII.

The Thing and Other Things.

I returned to Mr. Hacket's house late in the afternoon of New Year's day. The schoolmaster was lying on a big lounge in a corner of their front room with the children about him. The dusk was falling.

"Welcome, my laddie buck!" he exclaimed as I entered. "We're telling stories o' the old year an' you're just in time for the last o' them. Sit down, lad, and God give ye patience! It'll soon be over."

After supper he got out his boxing gloves and gave me a lesson in the art of self-defense, in which, I was soon to learn, he was highly accomplished, for we had a few rounds together every day after that. He keenly enjoyed this form of exercise and I soon began to. My capacity for taking punishment without flinching grew apace and before long I got the knack of countering and that pleased him more even than my work in school, I have sometimes thought.

"God bless ye, boy!" he exclaimed one day after I had landed heavily on his cheek, "ye've a nice way o' sneakin' in with yer right. I've a notion ye may find it useful some day."

I wondered a little why he should say that, and while I was wondering he felled me with a stinging blow on my nose.

"Ah, my lad—there's the best thing I have seen ye do—get up an' come back with no mad in ye," he said as he gave me his hand.

One day the schoolmaster called the older boys to the front seats in his room and I among them.

"Now, boys, I'm going to ask ye what ye want to do in the world," he said. "Don't be afraid to tell me what ye may never have told before and I'll do what I can to help ye."

For some months I had been studying a book just published, entitled, "Stenographic Sound-Hand," and had learned its alphabet and practiced the use of it. That evening I took down the remarks of Mr. Hacket in sound-hand.

The academy chapel was crowded with the older boys and girls and the townfolk. The master never clipped his words in school as he was wont to do when talking familiarly with the children.

"Since the leaves fell our little village has occupied the center of the stage before an audience of millions in the great theater of congress. Our leading citizen—the chief actor—has been crowned with immortal fame. We who watched the play were thrilled by the query: Will Uncle Sam yield to temptation or cling to honor? He has chosen the latter course and we may still hear the applause in distant galleries beyond the sea. He has decided that the public revenues must be paid in honest money.

"My friend and classmate, George Bancroft, the historian, has written this letter to me out of a full heart.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Poor Widow Gives Mite.

They were only four sacks, washed and pieced together by patient fingers and then fashioned into undergarments. Around the neck of each was a crocheted edge made from the string with which the sacks had been sewed. A poorly dressed woman brought them into the department of refuge clothing of the Red Cross as her "widow's mite."

"It isn't much," she said, as she undid the bundle, "but it is all I had, and I hope it will be of use to some Belgian woman who may have less than I have."

Dinner and Bittles.

Editor Charles Hanson Towne of New York looked up from a newspaper account of the magnificent American victories on the Marne.

"Wonderful!" said Mr. Towne, and his eyes shone. "Our troops are lightning trained, and they do thunderbolt well!"

POTATOES MUST BE PROTECTED FROM EXTREME HEAT AND COLD, AND LIGHT

Proper Potato Storage Protects the Spuds Against Extremes of Heat, Cold and Light.

(Prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture.)

Storing potatoes resembles banking money, because ordinarily it results in the potatoes selling for higher prices later in the season when the supply is not so abundant as at digging time. The potatoes earn dividends while in storage just as money in the bank accumulates interest. If all the potatoes were sold immediately after digging the prices would decline, due to the excessive offerings on the market. It permits of holding the more or less perishable potatoes in a salable condition over as long a period as is economically desirable. Storage also insures a more uniform market supply throughout the season.

It is the late or main crop varieties of spuds, intended for winter use, which are stored, as the early or truck crop potatoes are ordinarily disposed of directly from the field as harvested. Potato storages are practically of all types and descriptions, from primitive shelters, such as caves or pits, up to rather elaborate, artificially refrigerated storage houses. However, the fundamental purpose of the storage house, be it simple or elaborate, is to protect the spuds from extremes of cold and heat as well as from the light, and under proper conditions of humidity and ventilation. Care must be exercised not to keep the potatoes together in large bulk where the development of high temperature and deterioration will be favored.

Specialists of the United States department of agriculture believe that a temperature of about 36 degrees Fahrenheit is generally low enough for practical potato storage, and that during the earlier portion of the storage season the temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit is just as satisfactory except where powdery dry rot infection occurs. The freezing point of the potato is between 28 and 29 degrees Fahrenheit.

Potatoes, when exposed to strong or even moderate light are soon injured for food purposes, and on this account it is essential to exclude the light from the storage house, although exposure to modified light, where the spuds are kept cool and well aired, is not injurious to tubers intended for seed potatoes.

Protect Potatoes Against Wilting.

There should be sufficient moisture in the potato storage house to prevent the wilting of the tubers and at the same time to maintain a humidity content low enough to prevent a deposit of moisture on the surface of the potatoes. One investigator suggests a humidity of from 85 to 90 per cent as about correct for a potato storage room temperature of 33 to 35 degrees Fahrenheit. Generous provision for adequate ventilation must be made, the ventilators or air flues being arranged so as to insure a rapid and even distribution of air throughout the structure.

It is a bad practice to store potatoes in large bins or piles. Not infrequently the tubers are heaped to a depth of 10 or 15 feet, the pile being correspondingly large in the other dimensions. Such storage almost invariably results in violent sweating or curing, in which the spuds in the central portion of the pile are frequently subjected to a dangerously high temperature. This is especially true if the tubers are slightly immature or were not dry and free from moist soil when gathered, or if stored when the outside temperature was high, making it difficult to lower the inside temperature of the house. Such overheating may be avoided by inserting division walls at intervals throughout the pile. The division walls may consist of 2 by 4 inch uprights, on the 2-inch face of which are nailed ⅞ by 5 inch strips of any desired length, leaving a 1-inch space between each strip. This provides a ventilated partition, which can be of any height and length desired. By placing these in an upright position 5 to 6 feet apart as the bin or storage house is being filled, good ventilation will be secured and an easy avenue of escape for both heat and moisture provided.

Storage Adapted to Local Needs.

In considering the type of storage best suited to the needs the grower should bear in mind the temperature and rain or snow likely to occur during the storage period, the character and cost of the material involved, the nature of the soil and drainage, and the length of the storage period. Potatoes may be successfully stored in pits if provided with good drainage and given sufficient covering to insulate them against extremes of heat and cold, a well-drained site being essential. It is usually not advisable to excavate more than 6 inches, making the pit long and narrow rather than square in shape. It is inadvisable to store a large bulk of potatoes in one pit.

The potatoes are stored over a light layer of straw on the floor, while the pile is insulated against cold and heat by covering the spuds with alternate layers of straw or hay and soil. During the late fall, as the weather grows colder, more straw, as well as more soil, should be added to form a protective overcoat for the potatoes. Each layer of straw when compacted should be approximately six inches thick, while the final layer of soil should be six to eight inches deep, depending upon weather conditions. Ventilation may be provided by means of a wooden flue, the lower end of which extends almost to the bottom of the pit, while the upper end should project well above the covering, the valve being equipped with a wooden cap to prevent the entrance of rain or snow, and also in order that it may be closed entirely during very cold weather.

A pit of this sort when well made will provide perfect protection for the potatoes until spring, the objection to it being that the potatoes stored therein are not always accessible during the winter.

In regions where rainfall is slight, dugout potato cellars are commonly used, as rain is necessary to provide these buildings with water-tight roofs. Usually the pit or "hog back," as it is called, is placed on a short, narrow ridge of land which permits of easy approach and a central driveway into the pit at the grade line. It is necessary to brace such potatoes by means of posts and plates in order to prevent caving in. Some of the pits are more expensive and substantial, with the side and end walls made of concrete. Generally it is advisable to have the storage cellars or pits equipped with some system of artificial lighting.

Central Driveway in Cellar.

The storage cellar is usually provided with a driveway entrance and is considerably wider than the cellars without driveways, which often are only 12 to 20 feet wide, the entire space being used for storage purposes and the floor being either dirt, wood or concrete. Some of the best storages have driveways through the middle with bins on either side, the driveway being an earthen one with the storage bins having ventilated wooden floors laid on joists placed at right angles to the driveway and thus furnishing an unrestricted circulation of air beneath the bin.

CORN STANDARD NOW RISING

Fraction for 1913 Was 82.5 Per Cent, Slightly Above Mean for the Preceding Ten Years.

(Prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture.)

Merchantable corn was 82.4 per cent of the entire crop during the last 30 years, and the percentage has been declining one. In 1888-1897 the mean was 84.6 per cent; in 1898-1907, 85.6 per cent; and in 1908-1917, 80.2 per cent. The standard of merchantability appears to be rising. The fraction for 1918 was 82.5 per cent, or almost the mean for 30 years, but above the mean of the preceding ten years. The highest fraction in 30 years was 93.1 per cent in 1906, and the lowest 60 per cent in 1917.

GENERAL FARM NOTES

Every farmer should keep some kind of an accounting system.

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In 1916, the chinch bugs cost farmers of this country $93,000,000.

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Do not cultivate beans when the plants are wet from dew or rain.

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Cultivation is just as important now in the garden as earlier. Keep the ground stirred.

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Weeds first gain a foothold through carelessness in choosing feed and seed grain, and in not tackling the first comers.

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Do not leave your tractor out in the field without some sort of cover, shielding it from dust, dew and the occasional rain.